



CITY OF CAMBRIDGE

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

BRIAN MURPHY
Assistant City Manager for
Community Development

IRAM FAROOQ
Deputy Director for
Community Development

To: Planning Board

From: CDD Staff

Date: October 2, 2014

Re: **PB #292 – 88 Cambridgepark Drive Continued Review**

Update

The Applicant has submitted new materials in response to the questions and comments made by Planning Board members and staff at the previous hearing on August 19. In the intervening time, the Applicant's team has met with staff and with community organizations while making revisions to their proposal, and they have shared their progress with us throughout the process.

This memo addresses planning and urban design topics. Specific transportation issues will be addressed in a separate communication from the Traffic, Parking and Transportation Department (TPT).

Overview

In general, we believe that the proposal has been undergoing steady improvement since the original application was first heard in July. The changes that have been proposed in the latest submission directly address the comments that were made by Board members at the August 19 hearing. Those comments are summarized on the following page.

As a reminder, this project is seeking a Project Review Special Permit under the provisions of Section 19.20 as well as other special permits under various sections of the Zoning Ordinance. These special permits were discussed in detail in the initial staff memo (dated July 2), and are again summarized on page 3 of this memo. Some of the necessary special permits have changed due to the changes in the proposal.

From a broad planning perspective, the most significant consideration in the review of this project remains its conformance with the principles established in the Concord-Alewife Plan and the Concord-Alewife Design Guidelines, which promote the transformation of the area to a more mixed-use, transit-oriented character with active streetscapes, encouragement of walking, bicycling and public transportation over auto travel, enhanced open space, and improved stormwater management. The Citywide Urban Design Objectives and Flood Plain requirements are also key factors. The specific criteria and guidelines for Planning Board approval are provided as an attachment.

Along with comments on the proposal itself, one of the key issues expressed by the Planning Board has been the importance of promoting a greater sense of place within the area at large. The previous staff memo provided some background to past planning efforts, and this memo provides some brief updates on those topics. We acknowledge that there will be much work to do in the future as the area transitions.

Specific Comments from Previous Hearing

The following summarizes some of the key comments made by the Planning Board on August 19.

Comments on project

- Heading in the right direction conceptually. Adding retail, removing garage entrance are positive. Sorry that there are fewer housing units, but helps mitigate impacts, provide balance. Hanover project demonstrates that 6-story height is not bad, but more articulation is helpful to break up the length.
- Presentation more schematic than Board often sees. Helps to see specific materials, samples.
- Massing is long, unrelenting. Feels like much of site is consumed by structure. Needs more effort to break down massing. Could it break into separate buildings?
- Goal is to create visually interesting, lively streetscape. Suggest color, awnings.
- West residential section has a better feel, using a sunnier, more “bricky” color.
- East residential section feels gray, dismal, less residential. Don’t like vertical striation. More can be done with balconies, bay windows, creating more interest where the building “steps out.”
- Garage feels heavy, gray. Would like to see some decoration.
- Retail spaces not very fully developed. Is there room to put tables, umbrellas? More thought about the visibility of interior spaces is needed, possibly in design of interior lighting.
- How will people be encouraged to use the “activity center” at the southeast corner?
- Work more with abutting property owner where project abuts open space.
- Increase in 3-bedroom units would be great.
- Comfortable with traffic and parking considerations overall. Need to resolve outstanding issues raised by TPT staff.
- Floodplain and stormwater requirements are mostly understood, but would like to hear more from proponent and DPW to understand fully. Why not a “boat foundation” with underground parking?
- Emphasize open space, vegetation to address heat island effect.
- Retail placement is important. Suggest working with a retail specialist and/or CDD staff.

Comments to staff

- Urge more thinking about how pedestrian/bicycle bridge can be advanced.
- Encourage property owners in Triangle to work together to promote placemaking goals.

Required Special Permits

Due to the proposed reduction in size, a special permit to increase the FAR beyond the base zoning limitations is no longer required because the FAR will remain below the base zoning limits (the maximum in the district is 1.50, and the as-of-right inclusionary housing bonus allows a 30% increase). The special permit for increased height may still be required. Although most of the building will be below the 70-foot height limit in the base zoning, some elements will reach 78 feet.

In addition, because retail uses are proposed that may not be allowed by right in the base Office 2A zoning district, the Planning Board would need to approve any such uses under the Alewife Overlay District requirements in Section 20.94.1.

Category	Required Special Permits	Applicable Criteria
Alewife Overlay Districts (AOD) Special Permits (Section 20.90)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FAR (maximum of 2.00) Height (maximum of 78') Reduction in required yard setbacks (min. 15' in front) Pooled parking across lots Waiver of Gross Floor Area for parking structures in a flood plain <u>Approval of retail uses not otherwise allowed in base zoning</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objectives of the Concord-Alewife Plan Concord-Alewife Design Guidelines <i>(See appendix)</i>
Project Review Special Permit (Section 19.20)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project exceeding 50,000 sq. ft. of Gross Floor Area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traffic impact indicators Citywide Urban Design Objectives <i>(See appendix)</i>
Parking Modifications (Article 6.000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction in required parking Common driveway Reduction in setback of parking spaces from property lines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parking reduction criteria <i>(see appendix)</i> Site design considerations <i>(based on general criteria – Section 10.43 – see appendix)</i>
Flood Plain Requirements (Section 20.70)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development in a flood hazard area (Zone A and AE) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flood water impact criteria <i>(see appendix)</i>; also review by City Engineer and Conservation Commission
Parkway Overlay District (Section 20.60)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waiver of special dimensional requirements – height setbacks, facades, fencing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objectives of Section 20.60 <i>(A small portion of the site is within the Parkway Overlay District, though the site does not directly front the parkway)</i>

Updates on Area-Wide Planning

Pedestrian/bicycle bridge connection

At the last meeting and in our previous memo, staff described efforts made toward advancing a pedestrian/bicycle connection over the railroad tracks separating the “Triangle” and “Quadrangle” districts as envisioned in the Concord-Alewife Plan. Since the completion of that plan, the City has collected \$375,000 as conditions of special permits for various projects in the area and has allocated those funds to conducting a feasibility study for such a connection. A consultant has been retained by the City to conduct this study. Special permits for projects abutting the railroad tracks have also included conditions to provide potential bridge landing sites (as is recommended for the current proposal).

At the last meeting, staff explained that the City was attempting to leverage the \$375,000 as a matching contribution to support a \$925,000 grant application under the Federal TIGER program. This grant would have advanced the project on a quicker timeframe; however, in the intervening time we have learned that the City’s application for that grant was not successful. The City is considering options to re-submit a modified grant for 2015, but will proceed with the feasibility study in the meantime.

The feasibility study for the bridge is now beginning with some data collection complete. A schedule for completing the study is being prepared. The process will include meetings with all relevant city departments, stakeholders and the public.

The City’s consultants have also started to look at the feasibility of a future commuter rail station in this location in connection with a bicycle/pedestrian bridge. Given the curvature of the rail tracks in the Alewife area, the potential station location is limited. Once more information is known, we will meet with state officials to review possible options further. The state has indicated an initial interest in the project but said that funding would need to come from outside of state revenue sources. Other new commuter rail stations in the region have been privately funded. Therefore, alternative funding mechanisms for construction are being explored.

Engagement with neighboring property owners

The opportunities for City engagement with property owners and stakeholders in the area are evolving. CDD’s Economic Development Division has begun to engage with the recently formed Alewife Business Association. Like other business associations around Cambridge, this organization will provide opportunities for shared programs and activities to improve the area as a whole. It will also provide a forum to discuss common issues and provide guidance to the City on public improvements or initiatives. City staff will also be engaged with the formation of a Transportation Management Association for the area, which will involve participation from different property owners and businesses.

Experience has shown that it can be challenging for the City to engage in meaningful discussion with property owners who are not motivated to improve their properties or otherwise seek City approvals. Nonetheless, staff will continue to pursue opportunities for stakeholder engagement whenever those opportunities arise. It is notable that the developer for this project has been particularly proactive in reaching out to other property owners to explore improvements that can be made beyond the project site, which is helpful.

Comments on Proposed Changes

Program of uses

At the last hearing, staff did not have an adequate opportunity to comment on the significant changes that have been proposed to the development program as a whole. The proposal now seeks to provide only 254 residential units (reduced from 378) with a proposed reduction in FAR and height, both of which are now closer to the base zoning limitations than the increased development authorized under the Alewife Overlay Districts.

While the reduction in units does not necessarily align with the citywide and Concord-Alewife objectives that aim to increase housing supply, the project will still contribute a significant number of units, including affordable units, and will help to support an overall balance of residential and commercial uses on Cambridgepark Drive consistent with the Concord-Alewife goals. Moreover, the reduction in units allows for better management of the urban design impacts of the building by reducing the scale and mass of the residential component as well as the parking facility. The mix of housing units remains similar to the original proposal, with about 30% studio units, 48% one-bedroom, 18% two-bedroom and 4% three-bedroom.

Another significant change is that additional spaces have been designated for future retail and community use at the ground floor of the building. As discussed in the previous memo regarding planning for the “Triangle” district as a whole, supporting ground-floor retail is important to promote a more mixed-use neighborhood character in the area. Although the site does not have frontage onto Cambridgepark Drive, which has the most foot traffic and thus the greatest potential for retail, the east and west ends of the building benefit from proximity to neighboring sites that may be redeveloped in the future (providing opportunities for “two-sided” retail) as well as proximity to a potential railroad crossing and/or commuter rail station (see previous page).

It is important to consider the viability of retail space, and experience has shown that the specific design of the space can have a significant impact. Given the proximity to a major auto-oriented regional retail center, the types of retailers most likely to succeed are small operations (in the range of 1,000-3,000 square feet) such as cafés, convenience stores and everyday consumer services that would serve the immediate office population in the daytime and the resident population on evenings and/or weekends. It would be important to design the spaces so that they can be easily divided if necessary to secure smaller tenants, and so that they could accommodate the type of equipment needed for a café, small restaurant or other use requiring specialized equipment and ventilation. A small tenant might not be able to afford the fit-out of the space if significant modifications to the building are involved. The Planning Board might consider requiring continuing design review of the retail spaces by CDD staff to ensure that best practices are being employed.

Site planning and open space

At the site planning level, the project has made a number of positive moves since the last Planning Board hearing. This includes greater clarity of pedestrian priority zones and crosswalks, and improved open space and amenity areas. Notably, in front of the eastern residential building entry a gathering

space adjoining the dog park is proposed. A more direct pedestrian route from Cambridgepark Place is provided, which aligns with a building entry. In addition, opportunities for seating areas have been distributed throughout the linear open space area. Further review of the two plazas on the north side of the building may reveal some additional opportunities for seating/tables. The urban plaza space at the western end of the site has also taken on a more interesting appearance with the provision of café seating associated with the future retail space.

The landscape renderings show a well-landscaped interface with properties to the north, creating a very attractive setting for open space areas. However, further review of the condition of the south edge of 30 and 54 Cambridgepark Drive is still required to ensure the most attractive open space is created and any synergies with neighboring development are realized. Furthermore, the extent of paving has increased in the revised scheme, which should be reviewed to maintain as much landscaping on site as possible. The sidewalks along the north side of the street are quite long and will be unshaded in the summer. Alteration to the tree planting layout and/or the sidewalk layout could make this a more pleasant option in warm weather. There are still details to be resolved regarding the landscaping, so if the Board approves the project, staff recommends continuing design review focusing on landscaping.

Sense of place

The creation of a sense of place has most recently been of considerable concern to the community and the Planning Board. Clearly, sense of place is often difficult to define and determine and it is often different for everyone. However, some key tangibles include creation of green spaces and public places for people to gather, interact and contribute to community life. In the case of the Triangle, there is a lack of such facilities, which this project has in part as sought to address. A series of public spaces along the northern side of the building, potential for two urban plazas, a children's play space that is situated in a place that is convenient to multiple residential buildings, as well as a communal gathering space and community center are proposed. Such attempts to improve and enhance open space and community amenities respond to the Citywide Urban Design Objectives and are consistent with the Concord-Alewife Plan and Design Guidelines.

Building massing, scale and height

In response to the Planning Board's concerns about the length of the building the proponent has provided a 20' separation between the parking garage and the eastern building above the ground floor. The centrally located break frames a rearranged entry plaza and bike storage space, and also corresponds with an open space node. The originally proposed large overhang has also been minimized. While the length of the building remains, the break does enable a view out to the sky at pedestrian level, provides additional corners, creates added points of interest and activity, and allows some solar access to the north side of the building, including landscape areas. Combined with the revised architectural treatment and use of color discussed below, views down the internal street to the eastern building appear much more inviting and bright.

While the building separation achieves many positives, it also exposes the blank side elevation of the garage to pedestrians and five levels of housing. Treatment of the garage wall requires further

consideration with an emphasis on softening this elevation. Although a garage wall is not the optimal outlook for apartments, each housing unit has been designed with a dual aspect. It must also be recognized that a more urban condition is evolving in Concord-Alewife, and particularly the Triangle.

The building height has remained at 70' and the massing approach of separate blocks with different architectural expression has been strengthened by the introduction of the building break. The visual interest of the original proposal with different roof planes and heights has been retained with some of the penthouse mechanicals thoughtfully incorporated into these elements.

The parking garage has been scaled back in response to the Planning Board's comment. The outcome is a less monolithic appearance and a lighter feel. While still a large structure, the active ground floor use associated with the community space, combined with the green wall and proposed architectural screening respond positively to the Concord-Alewife Design Guidelines. The proponent has prepared three screening options to be discussed at the Planning Board Hearing.

Building design and street edges

While the ground floor plan looks relatively boxy as a consequence of the parking area, there is an array of setbacks and stepbacks on the above levels that break down the perceived scale of the building. There are also enough windows, building entries and varying insets on the internal street frontage to create an interesting walking experience

The western retail node remains the most pleasing aspect of the building as evidenced in the revised perspectives. This has been further enhanced with the co-location of the café and building entry, as well as outdoor seating and signage. Further along the west elevation towards the rail tracks, the ground floor has been left blank and some vertical landscaping is proposed. Given this will be a pedestrian interface and potentially the location of the bridge landing, consideration of some additional fenestration is needed.

Much of the recent design effort has focused on the architectural character of the eastern residential building. Improvements have been made to the articulation and architectural treatment of this building, which has resulted in a more pleasing and interesting form. Use of stacked inset balconies, greater expression of vertical bays and horizontal lines, as well as more contrasting colors and removal of the dull gray, has achieved this positive outcome. This provides for a more integrated and distinct design treatment, which enables the overall pattern of fenestration, building materials and massing to predominate rather than the flat, industrial look of the original proposal. The additional modulations wrap around the corners of the building breaking down the perceived scale of the entire structure into smaller visual components.

Following some criticism of the choice of materials and colors, design changes have also introduced red brick to the eastern residential building. A recessed brick plane is proposed to sit behind projecting, lightweight volumes on the north and east elevation, which gives the building a more residential feeling, more richness and depth, and resolves the upper level setback. In some ways and in some views, the brick plane also appears to reference the Rindge Towers, which grounds the project in some context. Part of the brick-clad plane also wraps around to the south elevation, which creates more interest and

assists with differentiating the concrete plinth from other sections of the building. This has resulted in a livelier appearance when viewed from across the rail tracks and from Alewife Brook Parkway. While the abovementioned design changes contribute to the Concord-Alewife Design Guidelines aims of creating an architecturally diverse district, the diversity of materials and colors may be too busy in some locations and could perhaps be simplified.